

A Demonstration of Warm-up Techniques With Young Children

PETER L. KRANZ

ABSTRACT. In this article, the author reports on a demonstration of 10 warm-up techniques that were presented at a conference of educators and caretakers of young children. A small group of 5-year-olds chosen by the conference organizers acted as protagonists in presenting these techniques. During the sharing at the completion of the demonstration, the audience indicated that this was a positive learning experience.

AT A WORKSHOP on the education and care of young children, I demonstrated psychodramatic warm-up techniques to use with this group. After considering how to present the material most effectively, I decided against the presentation of a paper followed by discussion, which is the usual format at conferences of this type. Instead, I chose to demonstrate various warm-up techniques, with young children as participants. The goal of the workshop was to demonstrate to childcare professionals how the use of these techniques could be helpful in encouraging children to explore aspects of their selves in greater depth.

Psychodrama is more than talk; it is action in the present through the eyes of the protagonist(s). Young children are more comfortable in playing out their particular truth than they are in using verbal expression. Children often feel safe and creative when, through play, they look at both painful and pleasurable moments in their lives. The use of psychodramatic warm-up techniques enhances greater in-depth self-exploration of these particular feelings. The uniqueness of the child is reinforced by the director, so that the emerging self can be more easily accepted by the child. In this process, the director must understand and feel comfortable interacting with young children.

The organizers of the conference, naive about psychodrama, were initially leery of my proposal. Their concerns were fourfold: The atypical format of the proposed presentation, the actual involvement of young children as participants, the spontaneity of the psychodrama process, and the learning value for the observers attending this particular workshop.

Preparation

Once the workshop proposal was accepted, the conference organizers agreed to find approximately eight participants between the ages of 5 and 8. The children had parental permission and were told that participation was strictly voluntary. If at any time before or during the presentation, they became uncomfortable and wished not to participate, they understood that they would be excused.

I met with the children and their caretakers approximately half an hour before the presentation to explain further and to elaborate on their concerns. During this meeting, I reassured the children that they would have fun and that they should just be themselves. Both the children and I felt a sense of nervous excitement. I had never directed a psychodrama with a group of children so young. In addition, the demonstration was to be presented to an audience of 10 to 15 adults, many of whom were unfamiliar with the spontaneity of psychodrama. The 60- to 75-minute presentation was to take place in the public school classroom. I requested supplies—large crayons, white paper, and colored chalk. As I prepared for the workshop, I was guided by material from Kranz, Lund, Pruett, and Stanley (1982), Rowan (1971), and Shearon (1980).

Workshop

At this workshop, I presented the topic, using three 5-year-olds, to an audience of 12 adults. The organizers of the conference apologized for the limited number of children, all of whom were female; however, there was no time to recruit more children. Adding to my surprise at having only three participants was one of the 5-year-olds who, with hands on hips, announced that unless the session began promptly, she was not going to participate. At that moment, I wished for a psychodramatic double to express feelings of chagrin.

As the director, I began by warming up the audience with a brief explanation of the elements of psychodrama. Next, the warm-up focused on the three children. I was aware that because of their ages, limited group size, and involvement in a new situation, the children seemed anxious. Knowing that children have a more limited attention span and are action oriented, I kept the warm-up brief. To help ease the children's feeling of anxiety, I had the adults position themselves along the edge of the room in a large circle. With the children in the center of the room, it gave the appearance of a round stage. The audience was asked to sit on small chairs or on the floor so that there would be no great difference in height between them and the children. Next, I had the children and the audience introduce

themselves, using first names. Sensing that the children were becoming restless, I quickly moved into the actual warm-up demonstration using action techniques.

Warm-up Techniques

The warm-up techniques were appropriate for a small group of 5-year-olds. Instructions were short and simple; however, I offered further explanation when I noticed confusion or lack of understanding. The following 10 techniques are in the exact chronological order of presentation. The order was chosen to facilitate and encourage participation in the subsequent warm-up techniques. I wanted the children to feel comfortable and experience success in completing the required tasks.

The first warm-up was called the clock. In using this technique, I drew a clock on the floor, with each of the hours of the day represented. The children were asked to place themselves at their favorite hour and then at the hour that they liked least. They were given the opportunity to express either verbally or nonverbally what they liked or disliked about those particular hours. The best-liked hours tended to be those after school, when the children played and watched their favorite television shows, usually situation comedies and cartoons. Bedtime was the least favorite hour.

A second technique was selection of favorite numbers, letters of the alphabet, and geometric shapes. The children seemed to enjoy this activity, particularly when they used their bodies to demonstrate a variety of shapes. I also asked the children to create sounds to match their letters, numbers, and shapes. With this particular activity, the children seemed to break out of their initial shyness, often laughing and making noises to reflect their particular choices. They seemed to enjoy the action of their own creations, which is an important point to note in encouraging self-expression and exploration.

Their third task required them to select and become their favorite animals. During this demonstration, they became very animated and uninhibited. Sounds of barking and meowing echoed throughout the room. I observed that the children had no difficulty in self-expression as nonhuman characters; however, they found it difficult to wait their turns and often interrupted each other.

As the fourth warm-up activity, I selected a favorite fantasy figure and demonstrated this choice to the group. To clarify this concept for them, I explained that a fantasy figure is not a real character but one that is created through make-believe. This explanation seemed to be understood by the children because they smiled and responded quickly to the concept. All the children selected more than one character, and their choices were taken

from a variety of family television shows, for example, a character from Sesame Street. Portraying a particular character appeared easy for the children, and they enjoyed the exercise because they could recognize the characters chosen by the others.

In the fifth activity, the children commented on their feelings about their first names and on whether or not they would have preferred another name. They all felt very happy with their given names and did not wish to change them. When I suggested that the children try out a new name, they thought that was silly and laughed at the request.

The sixth technique involved selecting favorite holidays and showing and telling the group about them. Favorite choices were birthdays and Christmas. The children recounted their memories of past gifts received on particular holidays, with dolls and stuffed animals being the most popular presents. The participants experienced some difficulty when asked to become their favorite presents but found it easy to talk about the gifts themselves.

For the seventh activity, the children were asked to draw a picture using many bright colors and to tell a story about it. The pictures reflected family members in a happy situation. The task of drawing and describing the scenes seemed relatively easy and enjoyable.

Selection of a favorite place was the eighth technique. The term "place" seemed too abstract for the children and therefore I gave examples of places that they would be able to comprehend (i.e., house, kitchen, playground, and school). Once the children understood what was meant, they had no difficulty completing the task. The places selected were favorite rooms in their homes and also classrooms at school that they perceived as pleasant and comfortable.

In the ninth technique, I asked one of the children to describe another child to the group. In this particular activity, the children seemed more inhibited. This inhibition may have been the result of their age and the cognitive skills required, or it might have been related to the presence of the child to be described.

In the last warm up, future projection, the children discussed how they pictured themselves as adults. The three children selected their mothers as future role models. When asked to describe how they viewed them, they initially laughed, felt somewhat embarrassed, and then demonstrated a particular behavior of their mothers. The two most popular behaviors chosen were walking and talking.

Sharing

Sensing that the children were getting tired after nearly an hour of this, I ended the session by having them share with the audience how they felt

about the experience. The audience also shared their feelings about the demonstration and responded positively to the efforts of the three children. The children were so warmed-up that, during the sharing period, they expressed a strong desire to continue. After thanking both the participants and the audience, I related to them my feelings of anxiety regarding potential ineffectiveness of a psychodrama demonstration with such a small group of young children.

I was relieved to learn that the observers appreciated the risk of a live demonstration and found the results applicable to their work with young children. During the final discussion, the observers commented that the warm-up techniques would be valuable exercises for connecting children with each other and with adults. They felt that the psychodramatic warm-up techniques could be instrumental in children's deeper exploration of personal problems and that the warm-up techniques provided a safe environment for the expression of feelings. Finally, the observers noted that fantasy expression could lead to significant understandings of the real world of children.

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